

**Testimony Supporting**

**S.B. 272: An Act Concerning Social Security Support for Foster Children**

**S.B. 293: An Act Concerning Permanency and Transition Plans**

**H.B. 5347: An Act Concerning the Reporting of Children Placed in Seclusion**

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March 6, 2012

Senator Gerratana, Representative Urban, and distinguished Members of the Select Committee on Children:

We are testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

1. Connecticut Voices for Children **supports** S.B. 272, An Act Concerning Social Security Support for Foster Children, which would ensure that needed economics supports are in place for children in the child welfare system.

SSI benefits and other benefits from the Social Security Administration can provide crucial and necessary supports for children leaving DCF care.<sup>1</sup> S.B. 272 would make sure that such benefits are in place by requiring that DCF apply for benefits for eligible young people in its custody. Because it routinely takes three to five months for the SSA to process an application for SSI<sup>2</sup>, it is important that benefits be secured while a child is still in DCF care. As described in more detail below, extensive research shows that youth aging out of DCF care face a wide variety of challenges. Ensuring that basic supports are in place before youth age out of care will smooth these transitions and reduce the risk of some of the most negative outcomes, such as homelessness, which can have long-term consequences for both the youth and the state.

Furthermore, periodic review of each child's eligibility for social security benefits is crucial, as to ensure that benefits are in place if a child exits care before the age of emancipation (to reunification or guardianship, for instance). We therefore recommend that the bill be amended to mandate that such a review be included as part of the case plan review process. As case plan reviews must occur every six months and are likely to document any changes in circumstances that would affect SSI eligibility, they provide a natural opportunity to conduct an evaluation of benefit status.

2. Connecticut Voices for Children also **supports** S.B. 293, An Act Concerning Permanency and Transition Plans, a bill to strengthen the provision of services for young children and adolescents in DCF care.

S.B. 293 provides additional requirements for the permanency plan and permanency plan hearing process to enhance services provided to two particularly vulnerable groups, young children under the age of six and teenagers preparing to "age out" of DCF care.

The requirements for young children require the department of address whether the department has made any necessary referrals for early intervention, preschool, or special education services that are required by existing law. It has been well-documented that children in foster care face much higher

rates of many health problems, including development delays, than the general population.<sup>3</sup> Early intervention is the key to ensuring that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Therefore, there is a great need to ensure that the Department has provided any early childhood services to which young children may be entitled.

Furthermore, the bill strengthens transition planning requirements for adolescents between the age of 16 and 18 who are preparing to age out of DCF care. This portion of the bill builds on the requirements of the federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, which requires states to develop a transition plan “personalized at the direction of the child” during the ninety days before a child reaches the age of majority.<sup>4</sup>

Because youth aging out of care are less likely to have resources in place to support their transition to independent adulthood, these young adults are at high risk for poor outcomes in health, education, employment, and social/emotional development. Studies show that, among other things, youth aging out of care are far less likely to graduate from high school or be enrolled in college, far more likely to experience homelessness or involvement with the criminal justice system, and are less likely to be earning a living wage than their peers in the general population.<sup>5</sup> By ensuring that transition planning is documented as part of the permanency planning process for older youth, this bill increases the likelihood that kids preparing to age out of care will have access to needed supports.

3. In addition, Connecticut Voices for Children also **supports** H.B. 5347, An Act Concerning the Reporting of Children Placed in Seclusion.

H.B. 5347 requires data collection and analysis of the use of seclusion in schools. According to the Keep the Promise Coalition, limited surveying by the State Board of Education identified over 18,000 incidents of restraint and seclusion in the 2009-2010 school year.<sup>6</sup> However, incidents of the use of restraint and seclusion are not made public.<sup>7</sup> Requiring more complete reporting on the use of seclusion and the precipitating incident for both emergencies and students with individualized education programs (IEPs), along with public reporting of the data, will help ensure that seclusion is used appropriately. This information will also help identify schools and districts in need of enhanced behavioral interventions and others with effective alternatives to seclusion that might serve as models.

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<sup>1</sup> Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits are provided under Title XVI of the Social Security Act to children (and adults) with qualifying disabilities who meet certain income and asset criteria. In addition, certain children in foster care whose parents have retired, become disabled, or died may be eligible for Social Security benefits under Title II of the Social Security Act. These benefits may continue into adulthood if the child has a disability that began before age 22. See CRS Report for Congress. *Child Welfare: Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Benefits for Children in Foster Care*. Congressional Research Service. April 27, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Social Security Administration. *Disability Benefits*. <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10029.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> See Kools, Susan and Christine Kennedy. “Foster Child Health and Development: Implications for Primary Care.” *Pediatric Nursing*. 29(1), January-February 2003, 39-46.

<sup>4</sup> Public Law 110-351, §202.

<sup>5</sup> See Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, JoAnn S. Lee, and Melissa Raap, *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24*, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, p. 4. Available at: [http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest\\_Study\\_Age\\_23\\_24.pdf](http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/Midwest_Study_Age_23_24.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> “Restraint and Seclusion Fact Sheet,” *Keep The Promise Coalition*, (January 31, 2012), available at: <https://salsa.democracynaction.org/o/1650/images/Restraint%20and%20Seclusion%20fact%20sheet-%201%2031-12.pdf>

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<sup>7</sup> The Connecticut State Department of Education's Educational Data and Research Portal (CEDaR) does not provide data tables on restraint and seclusion incidents, nor include those counts on the Strategic School Profile reports. ([http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct\\_report/CedarHome.aspx](http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct_report/CedarHome.aspx))